

THE
CAUSES AND CURE
OF
SPIRITUAL DARKNESS.

A Letter from an old Minister to another in a depressed State of Mind.

DEAR BROTHER,

I DO pity you with all my heart, and that not barely from a principle of common benevolence, or even Christian charity, but from real experience of perhaps the like, or worse, condition myself.

Yours I suppose to be a nervous disorder, attended with spiritual darkness and distress; if so, by attending to my story, and the reflections arising from it, you may possibly find some consolation.

About eighteen years ago, I fell into a deep and dreadful oppression of spirits, the very remembrance of which is ready to make me shudder, even to this day. There was some great disorder of body, but my mind was still more disordered, and felt the weight of all. Every thing of a distressing and terrifying nature, as to my spiritual concerns especially, seemed to be present with me. I thought myself the most miserable being on this side hell. I often wondered to see people afflict themselves about the common calamities of life; *they* appeared mere trifles, *infirmities* that might be easily borne; but mine was a *wounded spirit*, torn with the clearest apprehensions of the malignancy of sin, and the displeasure of an Almighty God. I not only could not see any interest I had in his pardoning mercy, but feared I was given up by him to the tyranny of my corruptions, so that I should certainly fall into some gross and scandalous sin, as a just judgment upon me, and so be left to perish with the most

aggravated guilt, a monument of the Divine resentment against false pretenders to religion. I often wished to die, even though I dreaded the consequences. I sought the Lord by prayer and other means of grace, day and night, but he still hid his face from me; now and then a glimpse of hope would break in upon me, but it was of short continuance. The Bible seemed as a sealed book in which I could meet with no comfort, though often much to aggravate my distress and increase my terrors. I endeavoured to examine myself, and search for the evidences of renewing grace in my heart, but all in vain; the more I searched, the more dark, and confounded, and distressed I grew. I continued to preach indeed to others, but very often with this heart-sinking conclusion, that *I myself was a cast-away*. Sometimes, even in the midst of my work, the melancholy darkness would rush in upon my soul, so that I was ready to sink down in the pulpit. Though for the most part I was tolerable during the exercise, yet I generally went to the pulpit and returned from it with trembling heart and knees. Many passages in the book of Job, and the Psalms, particularly the 88th Psalm, I felt, as I read them, with peculiar sensations. Thus I continued for more than twelve months, enjoying scarcely two comfortable days together.

At length I came to this resolution, namely, to give up the point of proving myself a child of God already (which was what I had been labouring at all along) as a necessary medium of my comfort, and grant that I was a vile, sinful, and every way unworthy creature, admit the whole charge brought against me, and seek my remedy in Christ. For I argued, *There was forgiveness with God for the chief of sinners. The Blood of Christ could cleanse from ALL sin*—and therefore from mine—He came to *call not the RIGHTEOUS, but SINNERS to repentance*; sinners without distinction of degrees, sinners as such, and because they were such. It was said, that, *WHOSOEVER would might come and take of the waters of life freely, and that he would in no wise cast them out*. Hence I was led to observe, that, if I could not go to him as a *saint*, I might go as a *sinner*. I resolved, therefore, to lay aside my inquiries after the evidence of my interest in him as one of his renewed people, and to look entirely to him, from whom all renewing grace, and the evidences of it must come; to look

to him as a guilty, polluted, perishing creature, that had no *hope*, no *succour*, but in the pure *mercy of God* through him. And thus I was led to such views of the all-sufficiency of the great Redeemer, and his willingness to save even the worst of sinners, such as I concluded myself to be, as silenced all my doubts, scattered my fears, and gave the most delightful peace and joy to my conscience. I now learnt indeed what I thought I had (and perhaps really had) learnt before, namely, *to live by Faith alone upon the Son of God; to make his sacrifice and righteousness my constant refuge, and draw all my consolations thence.* I found I had unawares laid too great a stress upon evidences of grace, and looked too much to them for my comfort, and too little to Christ. I plainly saw that with all the brightest evidences of grace about me, I was still a sinner, and must apply to my Saviour as such, in order to give life and vigour to my consolations and hopes; and that the spiritual life in me must be perpetually supplied from the same fountain whence I had derived what I had already experienced. I found that the seasons of *darkness* were not the proper seasons for seeking after evidences; but that the immediate and leading duty was, *trusting in the Name of the Lord.* I saw more clearly than ever, that in the great business of acceptance with God I could bring no righteousness of my own that would avail; but that, as a creature utterly undone myself, I must look to him *who takes away the sin of the world.* That God *never rejected* any, that seriously and in earnest applied to him, because they were *more guilty* and *unworthy* than others, or accepted others because they were less so; and, in a word, that as the *best must*, so the *worst may*, come to him, through a penitent faith in the precious blood and righteousness of his Son, with equal assurance of a gracious welcome. And from that time to this (I bless God for his great mercy) I have never had any long-continued doubt of my interest in his saving love. Whenever darkness and distress assault me, I am enabled to look to him who is the light and consolation of Israel; and to remember that his grace is as free to me as another, and that he is as willing as *able to save to the uttermost ALL that come unto God by him.*

I send you this account, my dear brother, thus circumstantially, to let you see, if possible, that there has no

uncommon temptation overtaken you. Remember, though you may *walk in darkness and have no light*, yet there is a gracious provision made for all such in the Gospel, in the very nature and constitution of it in general, as well as in its precious promises and declarations in particular ; so that, if we take this Gospel just as it lies in our Bibles, we shall see that there is not the least room for even the worst of sinners to despair. For even to the impenitent and unbelieving, the Gospel opens a *remote* hope, as it is the means of leading them to repentance, and producing faith ; and to the awakened and sensible sinner, an *immediate* hope, as the means of that holiness and comfort he seeks. The grace that saves must be *entirely, absolutely, free to THEM* ; or else in the just and full conviction of their sin and guilt, it would be impossible any of them could have hope.

You want to see more of the image of God in you, more of the *saint* and less of the *sinner* : the desire is right and good ; but remember, were you the purest saint on earth, that purity, though an *occasion*, would not be the primary *ground and reason* of your comfort. We are *begotten again to a lively hope*, not by even our evangelical holiness, *but by the resurrection of Christ from the dead*, and the facts, doctrines, and promises connected with it, credited and trusted as they lie in the Bible. The greatest saint must depend upon the same righteousness and strength in Christ as the greatest sinner, and the latter is as welcome to that dependance as the former ; if, having the comfort of that dependance, he makes it his serious care to *purify himself from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God*. Though we are ever so *poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked*, yet we may apply to Christ, even in this miserable condition, with assurance of success, as appears from his own word, if we apply with a view to our deliverance from the *power* as well as the *guilt* of our sins.

All this you very well know, and therefore need none of my instructions ; but I meant not to instruct, but to stir up your mind by way of remembrance.

I scarcely ever knew a disconsolate Christian, however notionally clear in the doctrine of the Gospel, and the way of a sinner's acceptance with God, but that as to *act* and the *real exercise of his mind*, was somehow

entangled in his own righteousness ; and built his comforts and hopes so much upon his evidences of renewing grace, as in some culpable degree to overlook the *only Name given under heaven* for our consolation, and so far to miss his aim, and disappoint his desires and expectations. Terrified with the charge of guilt, his first attempt usually is, to prove himself not guilty, or at least to extenuate it, and prove it consistent with a state of grace ; this diverts his attention from the proper object in that case, and to which he should first look, namely, the *great atonement and everlasting righteousness of Jesus* ; for under all convictions of sin, the proper question with respect to our comfort is, not *how guilty* we are, but *how we may find forgiveness?* And the answer is, through a penitent faith in that atonement and righteousness ; for be the guilt less or more, *this only* can purge the conscience from it, and give us the peace of God ; and for this it is all-sufficient ; or take it thus,

We are sinners—we hear of a Saviour, and what he has done, and suffered, and is doing for our salvation—the questions hence arise

1. Are these things so ? Are the facts and doctrines, declarations and promises, of the Gospel true ? If we have any doubt here, our business is with the evidences of the Divinity of the Gospel.

2. Are those declarations and promises, &c. *free* and open to ALL without exception, who see their need of the grace therein implied ? If we have any doubt here, the due consideration of the nature and design of the Gospel—the infinite worth of the atonement—the style and language of the invitations and promises, &c. will afford abundant means of satisfaction. Nothing in the world can be more true and certain, than, that *God so loved the world, as to send his only begotten Son into it*: and it is as true, that *whosoever believeth on him, shall not perish but have everlasting life*. Which believing is neither more nor less, as to what is essential to the point, than a hearty and sincere *crediting* of the *truth* of this declaration ; and a humble, penitent *reliance* upon the promise connected with it, as *the word of the eternal God, from a sense of the need of his grace*, and with a *view to the obtaining it*. It is, as our Lord himself represents it in the context, just the same thing, as the stung Israelites looking to the

brazen serpent for a cure. Though wounded ever so deeply, if they cast an eye upon this medium with faith in the divine appointment and promises, they were as assuredly healed, as if they had received only the slightest injury; and that this was the case of *all* who so looked, *without exception*. Under convictions of our lost condition, and desire after deliverance, the first thing is *believing*, or looking by faith to Jesus, and trusting in his atonement, righteousness, and power. This is the foundation of all prayer, and every approach to God. For *he that cometh unto God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of all that diligently seek him*. He that would find light, and life, and peace with God, must first believe there are such blessings, and the way in which they are to be obtained, namely, through Jesus Christ. Without some sort of credit to the divine testimony, some trust in the divine promises, it would be impossible to have any real hope towards God, and without hope there can be nothing done in religion. Instead, therefore, of these inquiries and reasonings about matters not immediately pertaining to the exercise of faith, our business is to apply ourselves directly to that exercise, assuring ourselves of the truth of the promises, and relying upon them in humble confidence that they shall be made good to us.

But here, perhaps, the distressed Christian may be ready to say, "Faith is the gift of God, and I do not find he has given me that gift; I cannot believe, though I much desire it." To such a one I would answer, Faith is undoubtedly the gift of God, but the power to believe and trust, does not lie where such as you generally think it does, namely, *in a certain active energy in the mind; but it lies in the fulness and clearness of the evidence of the truth, and a capacity to receive it*; for all faith begins in *persuasion*, and persuasion is the result of evidence. Hence we read of believers being persuaded of the promises, and that *faith is the evidence* (conviction or evincement) of *things not seen*.

We cannot doubt of the testimony of God when once we are convinced it is his testimony; nor (if sensible of our misery, and really desirous of deliverance) can we avoid putting confidence in those promises of deliverance that we believe God has made us. These acts of the mind will follow in the circumstances supposed, unless we

purposely and wilfully withhold them against conviction, which no serious mind can do. Our inability to believe, therefore, lies rather in the want of *light* than of *power*; that is, the want of evidence as to the truth, reality, and importance of the object of our faith, or the want of a capacity to perceive it. Both these are the gifts of God. The means of both he has put into our hands, with assurances of blessing the use of them. *Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* Upon that word, the marks of *Divinity* and *truth* are imprinted with the most glorious and affecting evidence. The glorious Spirit that dictated it, still breathes in it. *It is spirit and life, the power of God to salvation.* It enlightens the soul, it convinces of sin and of righteousness, and thus tends to produce in us a just sense of our misery, and of the suitableness, excellency, and all-sufficiency of Christ as a Saviour. A serious and attentive regard to this word, accompanied with prayer, and that degree of faith such a conduct implies as already given, must be the sure way of increasing faith, and filling the mind with true consolation. *Hear, and your souls shall live.*

But there is, perhaps, still a difficulty that the humble Christian cannot easily get over.—He doubts his right to the promises of grace; but here also he generally mistakes. He lays it upon some qualification in himself, which he thinks he must attain before he can embrace the promise in question, and which he seeks not by *faith* in Christ, but by some *works* of the law, some duties, which, not being done in faith, can avail nothing; and thus, as the prophet expresses it, he spends his *money for that which is not bread, and his labour for that which satisfieth not.*

The primary ground of all right that sinful creatures can have in the Gospel mercy, is, the free and *express grant of it from God himself.* The primary *medium* of putting us in possession of that right, is the *atonement and righteousness of Christ*; the next is that of believing the *testimony of God* concerning these things, and trusting in it. This is the scriptural representation. The *qualifications* which the perplexed and disconsolate Christian seeks with so much anxiety, therefore, are rather the *effects and consequence* of this grant, atonement, and faith, and not preliminaries to believing, or preparatories to faith

It is true, there must, in the nature of things, be some sense of the evil of sin and desire of deliverance, without which little regard will be paid to the gospel mercy and way; but these, his very uneasiness and distress show that he has already; and by the very terms of the promise, he that is *weary and heavy-laden may trust in Christ for rest*. If he *thirst* for them, he may come *and take of the waters of life freely*. And, indeed, what *qualifications* can a guilty, polluted, impotent creature bring to his Saviour, beyond a *sight and feeling of his misery*, and a *desire of deliverance*? Holiness in principle, and the fruits of it in practice, are necessary to the final enjoyment of eternal life; but not necessary to our believing the Gospel promises; because that belief itself is necessary to our holiness; for the *heart* is said to be *purified by faith*. The proper answer to every one that says, *What shall I do to be saved?* is that of the apostle, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*. Believe what God has testified concerning his Son, as the *great propitiation for sin*, and you will find that the experience of the efficacy of his blood, to purge the conscience from dead works, and of his power to save us from our spiritual blindness and depravity, and every evil, will follow. It is for want of entering thoroughly into this distinction, and mistaking the nature of faith, and the order and place appointed for it, in the great affair of salvation, that so many sincere Christians live such great strangers to the solid and lasting consolations of Christ.

My dear friend and brother, be of *good courage* and *wait on the Lord*, and your strength, in his due time, shall be renewed. He is *pleased with those who hope in his mercy*; *hope therefore in him*, and you will yet *praise his delivering grace*.

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